European Parliament

Japan's Parliament and other political institutions

SUMMARY

Japan is a constitutional monarchy, with a parliamentary system of government based on the separation of powers. The Emperor is the symbol of the state and does not hold political functions, only performing ceremonial duties. Nevertheless, he can play an important diplomatic role. With Emperor Naruhito's enthronement in 2019, following his father's abdication, Japan has entered the *Reiwa* (beautiful harmony) era.

The 2001 administrative reform strengthened the Prime Minister's leadership in the cabinet. The Chief Cabinet Secretary also plays an important relevant role. Ishiba Shigeru, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, has been the country's Prime Minister since September 2024.

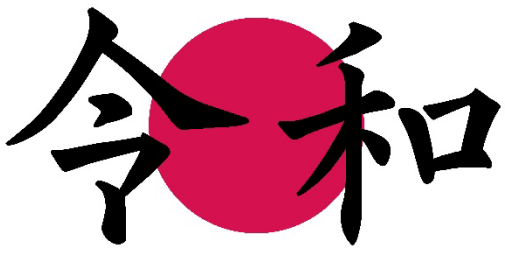
The Supreme Court is at the top of the judicial system. It is not a constitutional court, despite handling appeals arising from actual disputes. The appointment of its Justices is reviewed by the people at the first general election of the Lower House following their appointment.

Japan is a unitary state divided into 47 prefectures. A Metropolitan Government administers the capital, Tokyo. Japan's 1947 Constitution recognises 'local self-government.' Local governments carry out many of the national policies and programmes. They have limited autonomy, also because of their dependence on financial resources from the central government.

Japan has a bicameral parliament – the Diet. Although the two chambers share legislative powers, the Lower House (House of Representatives) prevails in the legislative process and is empowered to adopt the final decision on the budget and on the approval of international treaties.

Changes in the regional geopolitical environment and in the country's demographic structure have prompted debates on issues such as the revision of the 'pacifist' Article 9 of the Constitution and the distribution of seats among electoral constituencies.

This is an update of a briefing published in December 2020.



Ideogram of the Reiwa *age overlaid on the Japanese flag.*

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EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

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Introduction

Japan is an archipelago of around 6 850 islands, forming an arc to the east of the Asian continent, in the Pacific Ocean. Its surface area is slightly larger than that of Germany and it has a coastline of 30 000 km – the world's sixth longest. Located in the Ring of Fire, the country records the most earthquakes per year in the world.[1] It has a population of around 124 million (2023 data), mostly urban (92 %), but undergoing an accelerating decline. Long-term projections suggest that, even maintaining a medium fertility rate, it will fall below 87 million by 2070, and below 50 million by 2120.

Japan, like the EU, is an ageing society, topping the group of countries (most of them EU Member States) with the highest share of people aged 65 or above. Japan is the country with the highest median age, and in September 2024 it had over 95 000 centenarians, mostly women.

The country is ethnically homogeneous, with ethnic Japanese making up 97.5 % of the population. Japanese is the only spoken language. As regards religion, around two thirds of the population adhere to both Shintoism and Buddhism. Christianity ranks third, with a mere 1.1 % of the population. Freedom House, in its 2024 Freedom in the World Report, classifies Japan as free. The country ranks 70th out of 180 in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index and 16th out of 180 in the 2023 Corruption Perception Index.

Map 1 – Japan, its neighbours, and territorial disputes

Source: EPRS. The three territorial disputes in the area covered by the map concern:

- (Southern) Kuril Islands/Northern Territories, with Russia;
- Senkaku/Diaoyu (/Diaoyutai), with China and Taiwan; and
- Dokdo/Takeshima, with South Korea.

Executive power

The 1947 Constitution, never revised, is the second in Japan's history, being a formal revision of the preceding 1889 Meiji Constitution. However, whereas the Meiji Constitution drew inspiration from the Prussian Constitution, the 1947 Constitution was deeply influenced by United States (US) General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan until 1952, when the country's sovereignty was restored, with the exception of the Ryūkyū Islands – Okinawa prefecture – which only recovered their sovereignty in 1972.

Japan is a constitutional monarchy, where the Emperor's power is limited to mainly ceremonial duties and with a parliamentary system of government based on the separation of powers. It is a unitary state, split up into 47 administrative divisions – one metropolitan district (*to*: Tokyo), 2 urban prefectures (*fu*: Kyoto and Osaka), 43 prefectures (*ken*), and one district (*dō*: Hokkaido).

Head of State

His Majesty Naruhito (born 1960) is the 126th Emperor of Japan. According to tradition, he traces his lineage directly to Jimmu, the first emperor of Japan, who is considered a descendant of the goddess Amaterasu. He ascended to the throne on April 2019, following the abdication of his father, Akihito (see box). The Emperor (*tenno*) is 'the symbol of the State and the unity of the People, with whom resides sovereign power'. Article 1 of the 1947 Constitution departs from pre-war era tradition, when the Emperor was 'sacred and inviolable' and held total sovereignty. Though the Constitution does not call him 'Head of State', the Emperor's functions include: the appointment of the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the promulgation of legislation and amendments to the Constitution, the convocation of the Diet (the Parliament), the dissolution of the House of Representatives and the proclamation of elections to the Diet, the appointment and dismissal of Ministers of State, and the ratification of treaties. The Emperor serves an important diplomatic role: Emperor Akihito was active in reconciliation with former wartime adversaries.

The Emperor's abdication

In August 2016, Emperor Akihito publicly announced his wish to abdicate due to health reasons. As the 1947 Imperial Household Law did not contemplate the case of abdication, in June 2017 the Diet had to adopt a provisional law to allow it. Akihito formally declared his intention to abdicate in December 2017, and the government began making arrangements for the first imperial abdication since 1817, when Emperor Kōkaku abdicated in favour of his son. On 30 April 2019, Akihito stepped down, becoming Emperor Emeritus, and Naruhito became the Emperor of Japan. Following the imperial succession, a new era was proclaimed to define the country's future and to replace the *Heisei* era (achieving peace). It has been named *Reiwa* (beautiful harmony).

While Japan is often associated with its spectacular spring cherry blossoms, the imperial throne is rather referred to as the 'chrysanthemum throne'. The 16-petal chrysanthemum can be found on the cover of Japanese passports. The throne is dynastic and only male offspring from the family's paternal line can assume it. Emperor Naruhito has only one daughter, Princess Aiko. The shrinking of the imperial family – currently made up of only 16 members, as princesses who marry commoners are removed from it – and the shortage of male heirs have led to calls for a change to the succession rule so as to allow women to become empresses,[2] an idea supported by Japanese public opinion. Another idea is to reinstate the imperial family members of 11 branches that lost their status in 1947.

The debate on the reform of Article 9 of the Constitution

Under Article 9 of the Constitution, Japan renounced war and committed to not keeping an army. In the post-war period, Japan kept the right to individual self-defence, but not the right to collective self-defence, which states that an attack against one country is considered an attack against all of that country's allies. This put limitations on the status and operational capabilities of its Self-Defence Forces (SDF), as each mission they carry out must correspond to an express legal provision. There was a risk that the legislator would overlook certain eventualities and that the SDF would thus become irrelevant.

In July 2014, a cabinet decision, followed by the Diet's passing of new legislation in September 2015, reinterpreted Article 9 of the Constitution to allow for the application of a new collective right to self-defence, under three conditions. This change was one of a series of reforms and initiatives in defence and security policy due to the challenging regional geopolitical context – including enhanced Chinese assertiveness and North Korea's growing nuclear threat – and by Japan's desire to become an 'active contributor to peace', as then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō said. Japan can now help to defend its allies – the United States in particular – even if it is not under attack itself. The new legislative framework gives the SDF operational possibilities that they did not have in the past. In December 2022, Japan announced important changes to its defence policy, including a strong rise in its defence expenditure, which is to reach 2 % of GDP by 2027.

The primary political goal of the leading party's leadership has been to introduce the first-ever amendment to the Constitution, in order to include an explicit reference to the SDF. An amendment to the Constitution needs a two-third majority in both branches of the Diet and has to be approved by referendum. For this reason, the leading party promoted the adoption of the referendum law in 2007 (amended in 2014 and 2021). However, the ruling coalition does not hold a two-thirds majority in the Diet, and Japanese public opinion has been generally uneasy about abandoning the pacifist character of the Constitution.

Prime Minister

The executive power lies with the Cabinet, headed by the Prime Minister, whose leadership has been strengthened through the 2001 reform – aimed, among other goals, at strengthening political leadership over a traditionally strong bureaucracy.[3] The reform gave the Prime Minister the authority to submit to the Cabinet proposals on issues such as 'basic principles on important policies of the Cabinet', namely basic principles on external and national security policies, financial management, economy, budget planning, and administration. The Cabinet Secretariat, which coordinates ministries and agencies, drafts the 'basic principles'. The Chief Cabinet Secretary is very influential and is sometimes seen as a shadow Prime Minister, also holding the role of cabinet spokesperson. The maximum number of ministers has been fixed at 14, but three additional ones can be appointed (the Prime Minister is not included in these figures).

The Prime Minister, chosen by the Diet from among its members, appoints and dismisses the remaining ministers. The majority of ministers must be chosen from among the Diet's members. The Cabinet is collectively responsible to the Diet, which can adopt a no-confidence resolution. In such a case, the Cabinet has to resign collectively and new elections have to be held. The Cabinet enacts cabinet orders so as to execute the provisions of the Constitution and of the law. However, they cannot include penal provisions. Ishiba Shigeru (born 1957) has been Prime Minister since October 2024. He succeeded Kishida Fumio. *Kantei* is the name of the Prime Minister's official residence. Like the Diet, it is located in Tokyo's district of *Nagatachō*, with both terms sometimes used by the media to refer to domestic politic environment.

Table 1 – Japan's leadership

Position	Name	Date started
Emperor	Naruhito	May 2019
Prime Minister	Ishiba Shigeru	October 2024
Chief Cabinet Secretary	Hayashi Yoshimasa	December 2023

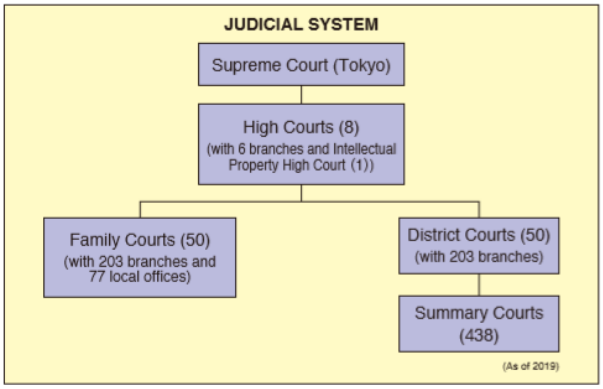
Judicial power

The Constitution stipulates the separation of powers and the independence of the judges. It has no provision for administrative courts, while it prohibits the setting-up of extraordinary tribunals. The Supreme Court is at the top of the judicial system. It is headed by the Chief Justice, appointed by the Emperor following his designation by the Cabinet. The remaining 14 Justices are appointed by the Cabinet and then confirmed by the Emperor. Supreme Court Justices are not necessarily judges. However, at least 10 of them must be selected from among judges, public prosecutors, attorneys, or professors of law at university or graduate-school levels. The appointment of each Supreme Court Justice is reviewed by the people at the first general election for the Members of the House of Representatives following their appointment. This review is then carried out every 10 years. If a majority of voters supports a Justice's dismissal, the Justice has to resign. However, this has never happened – also because the retirement age at 70 often makes a second review unlikely.

The Supreme Court hardly ever decides on cases as the 'Grand Bench' (all 15 Justices). Rather, three 'Petty Benches' made up of five Justices each adjudicate most cases. The Supreme Court is not a constitutional court and has no original jurisdiction. It is a court of last resort with powers of judicial review that handles appeals arising from actual disputes – *Jokoku* appeals against judgments rendered by high courts and special *Kokoku* appeals filed against judgments rendered by other courts.

Under the Supreme Court, eight High Courts execute jurisdiction over appeals against judgments by the District Courts, Family Courts, and Summary Courts. A three-judge panel handles cases in a High Court. Judges and assistant judges are appointed by the Cabinet from lists of candidates nominated by the Supreme Court. The only way to remove judges is through impeachment.

Figure 1 – Japan's judicial system



Source: Supreme Court of Japan.

The Lower Courts are usually courts of first instance. The 50 District Courts deal with both civil and criminal cases. District Courts also have jurisdiction over appeals against Summary Court decisions and rulings in civil cases. Within each District Court, six *saiban-in* – lay judges similar to a jury system – are selected to form a panel together with three professional judges to handle certain more serious cases. The *saiban-in* system was introduced in 2009. Six Family Courts[4] have exclusive jurisdiction over cases involving domestic relations and juvenile delinquency. The 438 Summary Courts are the courts most accessible to the average citizen. They have jurisdiction over civil cases of up to ¥1 400 000 (+/- €11 500) and over criminal cases punishable by lighter sentences.

The Ghosn case and calls for reform of the criminal justice system

In November 2018, Carlos Ghosn, Nissan Motor's chair, was arrested in Tokyo. Prosecutors indicted him for financial misconduct and for under-reporting his income. He was first released, then arrested again on the basis of new charges, and eventually released on bail three weeks later. He escaped surveillance and fled to Lebanon in the last days of 2019. Ghosn, who was barred from having contacts with his wife, claimed to have been questioned for eight hours a day, given limited access to interpreters, and given little opportunity to defend himself, as in Japan, once suspects have been indicted, 99 % of them are convicted. Mori Masako, then Japan's Minister of Justice, rebutted Ghosn's arguments, defending the fairness of the Japanese criminal justice system, where each criminal case goes through multiple stages. She underlined that, in Japan, only 37 % of accused suspects are indicted, and that Japan's Constitution stipulates that forced confessions shall not be admitted as evidence. The story has drawn international attention to the Japanese criminal justice system. The Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA) asked for a reform. In Japan, pre-trial detention can last up to 23 days in *daiyou kangoku* (substitute prisons). The JFBA has been demanding the eradication of the *hitojichi-shiho* (hostage justice), audio/video recording of processes in their entirety, and a court-appointed attorney system.

Relations between central and local governments

Japan is a unitary state, although the country's Constitution recognises 'local self-government.' The 1947 Local Autonomy Act, which took effect on the same day as the Constitution, governs relations between the central and the local governments. Further reforms introduced in 1999 and between 2011 and 2014 transferred more power from the national to the local governments. Meanwhile a June 2024 amendment to the law enabled the central government to issue directives to local governments during an emergency if an 'incident that could have a significant impact on the safety of the people' has raised doubts due to the ambiguity of the wording.

Japan's administration has a three-tiered structure. The top tier is the national government. Next are the two tiers of local government – 47 prefectures and 1 700 municipalities. Municipalities are classified as cities (at least 50 000 inhabitants), towns, or villages, according to population size. Both prefectures and municipalities have assemblies whose members, elected every four years by the population, have the power to approve the budget and submit bills and ordinances. The governor

(prefecture) or mayor (municipality), also elected directly by the population for a term of four years, acts as the executive, submitting bills, enacting regulations, and implementing the budget. The assembly can pass a vote of no confidence against the executive. In general, bills are submitted by the executive. Both the assembly and the executive have veto power, which is seldom applied. The executive also enjoys discretionary power that allows it to take prompt action when required.

Tokyo, the country's capital, with a population of 14 million inhabitants, has a unique administrative system. Despite counting as one of the country's 47 prefectures, the city's government is called the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) and encompasses 23 special wards, 26 cities, 5 towns, and 8 villages. This allows for a unified administration and supervision across the whole of the ward area, as well as local ward governments that are closer to the residents. Koike Yuriko has served as TMG Governor since 2016 and is the first woman elected to the post. Koike – who expressed frustration at not holding stronger powers as a governor to address the coronavirus crisis – obtained her third mandate in the July 2024 gubernatorial elections as an independent. A proposal to create the country's second metropolitan government, this time in Osaka, was rejected twice by referendum: first in May 2015, then in November 2020. Osaka is to host the World Expo 2025.

Table 2 – Competence-sharing among central and local governments

		Public works	Education	Welfare	Others
Central government		Expressways, Designated national roads	Universities	Pensions	Defence Diplomacy Currency
Local governments	Prefectures	Other national roads, Prefectural roads	High schools, Management of elementary and junior high schools, Personnel	Public health centres	Police
	Municipalities	Urban planning, Municipal roads	Elementary and junior high schools, Kindergartens and day-care	Garbage disposal, Care and welfare	Fire services, Resident registry

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication. This list is not exhaustive.

With the exception of foreign relations and national defence, most administrative functions are financed by both national and local governments. Local governments carry out many of the national policies and programmes. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, the ratio between local government expenditure and gross domestic product (GDP) was 11.7 %, about 2.5 times that of central government expenditure. However, ratios for tax revenue showed a different trend. Of the total taxes collected in FY 2022, national taxes accounted for 63.4 % and local taxes for 36.6 %. The financial autonomy of local governments is therefore limited – they are largely dependent on financial resources from the central government.

Tokyo's irresistible charm versus rural depopulation

Many municipalities have merged for reasons of economic survival and fiscal stability against a backdrop of rural exodus towards Tokyo and other metropolitan areas, and Japan's demographic crisis. In some areas, there are not enough candidates for the local assemblies. To counter this trend, in 2014 the national government put regional revitalisation high on the agenda, but the effort did not produce tangible results. In November 2024, the government (whose Prime Minister Ishiba was previously regional revitalisation minister) decided to double regional revitalisation grants and to adopt a 10-year basic plan for rural revitalisation.

Japan's Parliament

A bicameral system

The National Diet (*Kokkai* or National Assembly) is composed of the House of Representatives (*Shūgiin*) – the Lower House – and the House of Councillors (*Sangiin*) – the Upper House. Plenary sessions of both houses are open to the public.

The House of Representatives has 465 members (minimum age 25) elected for a four-year term – 289 of them chosen from single-seat constituencies and 176 by proportional representation. Although the two chambers share legislative powers, the Lower House prevails in the legislative process,[5] as it can turn draft legislation rejected by the Upper House into law with a two-thirds majority. It also has the power to adopt the final decision on the budget and on the approval of international treaties. The Cabinet can dissolve the House of Representatives.

The House of Councillors is composed of 248 members (minimum age 30) elected for a six-year term – 148 of them elected through a first-past-the-post system in 45 plural-seat prefectural constituencies and 100 by proportional representation. Every three years, half of the Upper House is renewed in a mid-term election. In contrast to the Lower House, the Upper House cannot be dissolved by any other power.

The last elections for the House of Representatives (general elections) took place in October 2024; the next mid-term elections for the House of Councillors should take place by July 2025.

Table 3 – Powers of the National Diet and of each House

Powers of the National Diet	Powers common to both Houses	Powers unique to each House
Enactment of laws **Decisions regarding the budget and other matters related to national finances** **Decisions regarding approval for the conclusion of international treaties** **Designation of the Prime Minister** **Initiation of amendments to the Constitution**	Election of the House-presiding officer, deputy presiding officer, and standing committee chairmen Establishment of special committees Establishment of rules pertaining to meeting procedures and internal discipline Right to conduct investigations in relation to government Right to accept and vote on petitions	Right of the House of Representatives to pass a no-confidence resolution against the Cabinet Convocation of the House of Councillors in an emergency session

Source: House of Representatives.

Parliamentary sessions

For parliamentary sessions, it is up to the Cabinet to call the National Diet – an imperial rescript is then promulgated. The Ordinary session is called once a year, starting in January, with a duration of 150 days and one possible extension. Extraordinary sessions can be called by the Cabinet, at the request of one quarter or more of the total number of members of either House, after a general election. A special session is called after a general election following the dissolution of the House of Representatives.

Electoral constituencies and the issue of equality among Japanese electors

The main rule of seat distribution across prefectures within the House of Representatives is, firstly, to give a seat to each of the 47 prefectures, then to allocate the remaining ones according to the population breakdown. Yet, in several rulings on elections to the Lower and Upper Houses, the Supreme Court has ruled that the large disparities in the weight of a vote between any two constituencies was 'in a state of unconstitutionality,' as this disparity exceeded 100 %. In other words, a vote cast in the least populous electoral district carried more than double the weight of a vote cast

in the most populous constituency. However, the Court did not invalidate the election results.[6] In 2016, the Diet amended the Public Offices Election Act, scrapping 10 seats in the Lower House and redrawing some electoral districts. After the Upper House elections of 2016, some constituencies were merged in order to rectify vote-weight disparities between the most densely and most sparsely populated electoral districts. A November 2022 law added 10 single-seat electoral districts to five prefectures, cut one each from 10 prefectures and redrew boundaries in another 10 prefectures. These changes affected 140 constituencies in 25 prefectures ahead of the 2024 elections to the Lower House. The day after the October 2024 general elections, lawyers filed lawsuits in several Japanese high courts aiming to annul the results and to rerun the vote.

The Upper House beginning to represent the country's diversity

The July 2019 mid-term elections for the House of Councillors produced an historic high share of female members (see paragraph on women in the Diet), the first openly gay male lawmaker, and two members with severe disabilities. These results may point to changing attitudes in Japan, where people with disabilities have long been kept out of the public eye.

Committees

There are two kinds of committee – standing (permanent) and special, set up through a House Resolution for a given Diet session. Each house has 17 standing committees. Their meetings are generally closed to the public, although sometimes the Chair might allow the media to attend. With special permission from the House, Members can meet even if the Diet is not in session. The two committees on Fundamental National Policies normally meet jointly as a forum for debate between the Prime Minister and opposition leaders on fundamental national policies. Each House sets up a Deliberative Council on Political Ethics and a Board of Oversight and Review of Especially Designated Secrets.

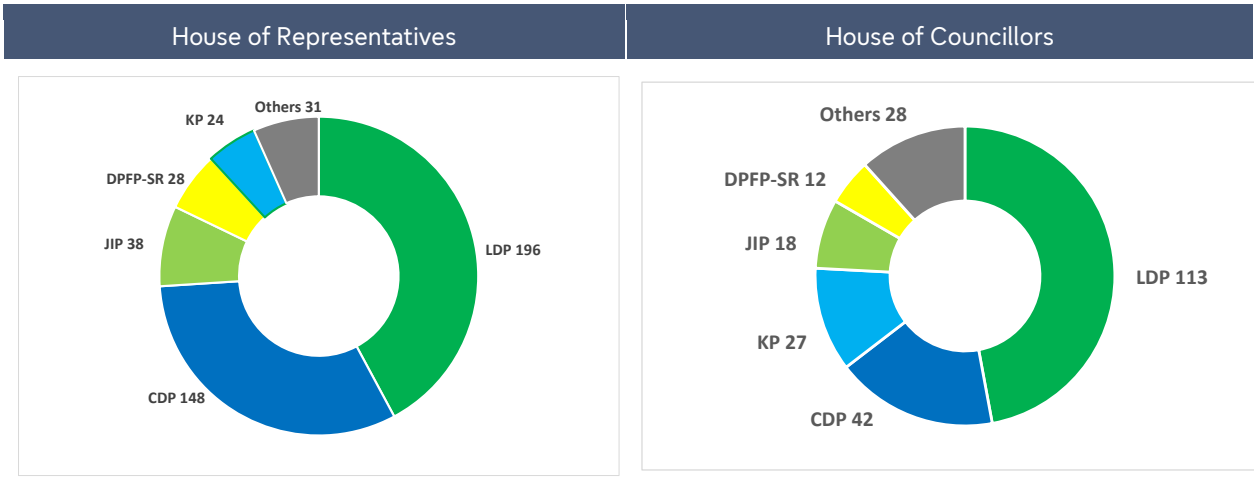
Table 4 – Standing and special committees of each House

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common to both houses</th><th>Specific to the House of Representatives</th></tr>
<tr><td>Standing
Cabinet
Judicial Affairs
Foreign Affairs
Financial Affairs
Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
Health, Labour and Welfare
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
Economy, Trade and Industry
Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism
Environment
Fundamental National Policies</td><td>Budget
Audit and Oversight of Administration
Rules and Administration Discipline
Special
Disasters
Political Reform
Okinawa and Northern Problems
North Korean Abductions and Other Issues
Consumer Affairs
Reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake
Regional Revitalisation and Formation of a Digital Society</td><td>Standing
Internal Affairs and Communications
National Security
Special
Investigation of Nuclear Power Issues</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2"></td><td>Specific to the House of Councillors</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2"></td><td>Standing
General Affairs
Research
Internal Foreign Affairs and National Security
National Life and Economy
Natural Resources and Energy
Commission on the Constitution</td></tr>
</table>

Source: House of Representatives, House of Councillors. In the case of committees common to both Houses, the name of the committee belonging to the House of Representatives has the words 'House of Representatives' placed in front of its name.

Parties

Figure 2 – Party representation in the Diet



Source: House of Representatives (November 2024), House of Councillors (February 2025). In the House of Councillors, 8 seats are currently vacant.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holds the record for longevity in power among highly developed democracies. It has held office almost continuously since its foundation in 1955, with the exception of the periods between 2009 and 2012, when the Democratic Party succeeded in breaking its hold on power, and between 1993 and 1994. The LDP is a conservative nationalist party, with a stronghold in rural areas. It has a liberal view of the economy and aims to maintain a strong relationship with the US. Analysts argue that the LDP has a strategy of giving benefits to key constituencies to consolidate power. Ishiba Shigeru has been the party's leader since September 2024, when he won an internal leadership election in which his predecessor Kishida Fumio decided not to take part. Ishiba immediately called general elections, in which the governing coalition lost its absolute majority: the electorate sanctioned the LDP for the slush fund scandals involving several party factions.

Abe Shinzō's legacy

Abe Shinzō was LDP leader from 2006 to 2007 and from 2012 to 2020. Abe, taking advantage of the opposition's weakness, led the party to three successful election victories – in December 2012, December 2014, and October 2017 – securing his position as Head of Government in a coalition with the New Kōmeitō. Hailing from a political dynasty, this popular and divisive politician had an assertive stance on defence and foreign policy. Abe was also the promoter of 'Abenomics', a strategy aimed at reviving Japan's economy and fighting stagnation and deflation. Abenomics was based on three arrows – boosting government spending while keeping the goal of fiscal consolidation, applying the monetary easing policy from the Bank of Japan, and implementing a package of structural reforms to enhance economic growth and competitiveness. Abe was assassinated in July 2022 during an electoral event.

The Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) was created by Edano Yukio in the run-up to the 2017 elections, following the Democratic Party's disbanding. Noda Yoshihiko – Japan's Prime Minister at the time of Japan's 2011 triple disaster (Great East-Japan Earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown) – has been the party's leader since September 2024. The party promotes pacifism as described in the Constitution, an inclusive society free from discrimination, and sustainable social welfare. In September 2020, it merged with the second-largest opposition party, the Democratic Party for the People (DPP). The CDP – already the main opposition group in the House of Representatives – raised its representation considerably after the October 2024 general elections.

The Japan Innovation Party (JIP) has its stronghold in Osaka. It advocates reform of the structure of the state – which it considers to be too centralised – in order to empower local governments. It also defends the preservation of Japan's traditional values and culture. After the resignation of its previous leader following disappointing results in the October 2024 general elections, in December 2024 the party elected Osaka prefecture governor Yoshimura Hirofumi as leader. Yoshimura appointed veteran Maehara Seiji as co-leader of Japan's second biggest opposition party.

The Democratic Party for the People (DPFP-SR), created out of a merger in 2018, split two years later, with more than half of its members joining the CDP. It is a self-proclaimed 'reformist centrist' party, listing freedom, symbiosis and responsibility for the future in its basic philosophy. It was unexpectedly successful in the October 2024 general elections but declined to join the coalition government, preferring to give its support on a case-by-case basis. Since May 2018, Tamaki Yuichiro (suspended for three months in December 2024 due to an extra-marital affair) has been the leader.

Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party) is a centrist party. Founded first in 1964, it was re-established in 1998. For this reason, it is often referred to as New Kōmeitō. It has been closely associated with the Sōka Gakkai, a pacifist lay Buddhist movement that spread rapidly across Japan during the 1950s and 1960s and today is active worldwide. Kōmeitō has been the instrumental junior partner in the LDP-led coalitions since 2012. According to observers, the party has exerted a decisive influence on security-related issues, including the debate on the modification of Article 9 of the Constitution (see box above). Saito Tetsuo has been the party's leader since November 2024.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) was founded in 1922. Tamura Tomoko has been its leader since January 2024. Its programme promotes socialist transformation of the economy, the end of the Japan-United States Security Treaty, and the withdrawal of the US military forces from Japan.

Dynasties in Japanese politics

According to Daniel M. Smith, Japan has an unusually high percentage of political dynasties in both the Parliament and the Cabinet. This could potentially affect candidate selection, elections, and even Cabinet promotion. Smith has pointed to the 1994 electoral reform as one of the reasons for such a high percentage. Purnendra Jain argues that even Japan's next generation of leaders and prime ministers will be, for the most part, hereditary politicians.

Parliament's role

Analysts point to a **diminished role for Parliament and an enhanced role for the Executive** in shaping legislation. Rules require a bill introduced in the Diet to be supported by 20 Members of the House of Representatives and 10 Members of the House of Councillors. In the case of bills that might have consequences for the budget, the quorum rises to 50 and 20 respectively. Despite such low quorum requirements, the percentage of bills initiated by the Diet that are finally approved is rather low. Under the authority of the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau (CLB, *Naikaku Housei Kyoku*) plays a leading role in drafting bills,[7] as it reviews all bills prepared by Ministers.

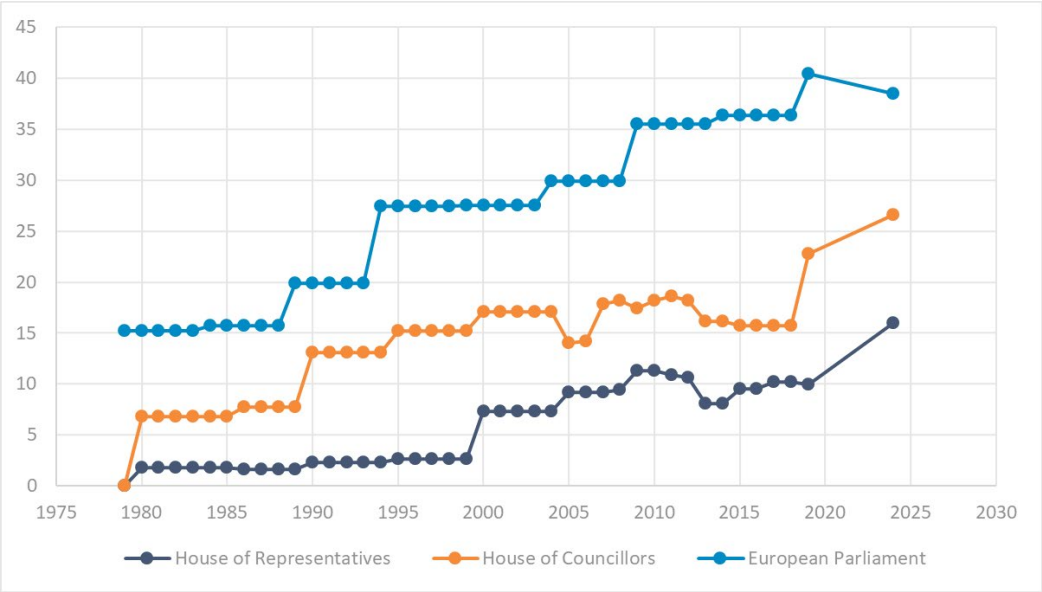
Japanese people's distrust in politics

The Diet – not to mention politics in general – is not faring well in public opinion. According to an OECD poll carried out in 2021, 52.4 % of the people had low or no trust in the Diet. Only 18.9 % had a higher trust. A Pew research survey conducted early in 2024 showed that most Japanese (56 %) said they did not feel close to any political party and only around a third were satisfied with the way democracy is working in their country. Distrust in politics is strong among young voters:[8] according to a 2023 *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper poll, 70 % of respondents under 40 years old said they did not trust politics. By way of comparison, an October/November 2024 standard Eurobarometer survey showed that the European Parliament is a trusted European Institution – by 53 % of respondents.

Women in Parliament

Women occupy 15.7 % of the seats in the Lower House (73) and 25.4 % of the seats in the Upper House (61). Figure 3 compares these figures to the percentage of women elected to the European Parliament since 1979. In 2024, 38.5 % of all MEPs are women.

Figure 3 – Share of women in the Japanese Diet and the European Parliament



Sources: Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, Kōchi Gender Equality Centre, European Parliament.

Despite Abe's 'womenomics' policy and some improvements, in 2023 Japan ranked 164th out of 186 countries in women's political participation, according to the International Parliamentary Union (IPU), and well behind other developed countries. The 2018 Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field requires political parties and groups to work as much as possible towards achieving equality in the number of male and female candidates in the elections for the Diet and the local assemblies. However, the law does not impose legal quotas, relying only on parties' voluntary efforts. On the whole, politics in Japan remains a male-dominated environment.

The first female speaker of the Lower House was Doi Takako, of the Japan Socialist Party (1993-1996). Previously, in 1986, she had become the first female leader of a major political party. The first female speaker of the House of Councillors was Ōgi Chikage, as she was known – her real name being Hayashi Hiroko. She was in office from 2004 to 2007. There has never been a female Prime Minister. Moriyama Mayumi is, to date, the only woman to have served as Chief Cabinet Secretary, from August 1989 to January 1990. Tamura Tomoko is the only female leader of a major party (JCP).

The European Parliament and the Japanese Parliament

The Delegation for Relations with Japan (D-JP), chaired by Adam Bielan (ECR, Poland), is the European Parliament's body in charge of relations with the Japanese Diet. It has held annual meetings with its Japanese counterpart since 1979, alternating meeting locations between the EU and Japan. The 41st EU-Japan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting took place in Strasbourg in July 2023. In their Joint Statement, the delegations, reiterating their unwavering commitment to further deepening the EU-Japan partnership, asked the international community to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine and to provide Kyiv with all necessary support. The delegations called for the establishment of international rules for safe and transparent artificial intelligence (AI) and affirmed their contribution to the promotion of the Hiroshima AI process.

MAIN REFERENCES

D'Ambrogio, E., Japan towards 2024 general elections, EPRS, European Parliament, October 2024.
Jochheim, U., Changing defence posture in Japan, EPRS, European Parliament, January 2023.
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ENDNOTES

1 The Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011 was the country's most powerful ever. It unleashed a tsunami that produced a death toll of 19 729, with 2 559 missing, and a nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The European Parliament expressed its solidarity in the 24 March 2011 resolution.

2 In October 2024, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommended that Japan 'amend the Imperial House Law to guarantee the equality of women and men in the succession to the throne'. The Japanese government lodged a protest against the recommendation. Emperor Naruhito's only child is a daughter, Princess Aiko.

3 The Cabinet Personnel Bureau was introduced in 2014 in order to exercise centralised control over the appointment of top bureaucrats.

4 Several cases of parental child abduction have put the spotlight on Japan's family legislation, which did not recognise shared custody, visiting rights, or the right of non-Japanese parents to have access to their children. Although Japan ratified the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction in April 2014, in reality there is a serious flaw in the country's implementation of the Convention. In February 2020, the European Parliament Committee on Petitions examined a series of petitions on parental child abduction in Japan. In July 2020, Parliament adopted a resolution on international and domestic parental abduction of EU children in Japan. According to Nishitani Yuko – a professor at Kyoto University – the resolution had an influence on the May 2024 revision of the sole custody system (to take effect by 2026), which represented a major change regarding parental authority.

5 In the House of Representatives, an open ballot is used for the national budget and other important bills. Members vote using one of the wooden name cards provided at their seat. A white wooden name card is cast to indicate approval of the bill in question, and a green wooden name card is cast to indicate opposition.

6 In November 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that the July 2019 election for the House of Councillors was constitutional, though a vote in the district with the fewest voters for an Upper House member carried three times the weight of a vote in the district with the most votes per Upper House member.

7 The CLB Director regularly appears in official government pictures – a sign of the extreme importance of this organ for the Executive.

8 The turnout rate in the October 2024 House of Representatives election was 53.85 % – the third lowest turnout since the end of World War II. Furthermore, a sample survey showed that, for 18-19-year-old voters, the turnout rate was only 43.06 %. (The 2017 elections were the first after the voting age was lowered from 20 to 18).

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